Each fall during new student orientation, Leigh and I host a tea at our home for the parents of new students. Our hope is that they will feel as welcome at Naropa as their offspring do, both by meeting the president and his wife and by being able to talk with other new Naropa parents. After the group has mixed for a while, I call them together and ask them a question: How did you and your student come to learn about Naropa? The stories that come tumbling forth are wonderfully rich and diverse, both predictable and utterly serendipitous. It is, of course, risky to generalize about Naropa students, but the stories that come forth in this context have tempted the parents (and me) to offer the following stereotype of students who come to Naropa.

Naropa students are artistic and creative. They are unconventional and individualistic. They are ethically discerning and morally fervent. They want to save the world. They are often the youngest sibling. They are skeptical about all forms of authority. And—parents often smile lovingly as they say this—they are a challenge to raise! The upshot of all this is that parents are delighted to see that their student will at last be in a school where there are other like-minded and like-hearted students, ready to challenge and support each other, ready to change the world.

One of the things researchers have learned is that all organisms, including human ones, learn optimally under conditions of moderate discomfort. Teachable moments happen when students are beyond their comfort zone. Naropa students are particularly eager to live in this zone, which exerts a wonderful pressure on our faculty and staff to deliver the goods. The symbiosis between our students’ appetite for personal growth and our faculty’s experience with both contemplative practice and cognitive learning makes for consistent transformation of all parties on campus. Deep learning is woven into the fabric of this place, in significant part because of the kind of student we attract.

In the pages that follow, you will be introduced to some of Naropa’s current students. There are literally hundreds more whose stories are equally compelling and who, in these times when the world is so very needy, give me cause for hope. They also deepen my conviction about the importance of Naropa’s mission of encouraging each student to come to a deeper knowledge of oneself, so that one might serve one’s fellow beings more ably. To live and work with these students on a daily basis is truly inspirational. Witness the following:

Early last fall, I was speaking with one of our student leaders and asked her how her summer had gone. She replied that it was okay, since she’d been able to fulfill a dream of working in Japan, but that it was also disappointing. When I asked why, she replied: “Because it was too easy. I was looking to put myself under a challenge that was so daunting I’d have to cry myself to sleep each night, and that didn’t happen.”

When students ask this much of themselves, how could we not try to reply in kind?

Thomas B. Coburn
President